

A Longitudinal Study of Language Learning Strategy Use by Prep Year EFL Students¹

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Abstract

This research attempts to add to the existing literature of language learning strategy uses by advancing our understanding of what language learning strategies (LLS) are preferred by learners who were given a one-year English education at two state universities and to find out whether strategy uses were directly related to being successful in language learning. A total of 286 students filled out a questionnaire called Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), participated in the study. For deeper information 6 students from each university were asked to answer interview questions. It also aimed at discovering what strategies the students mostly preferred and whether there were any changes in strategy choices at the end of the learning program. The results of the study showed that there is a significant relationship between students' language learning strategy use and language learning levels. In addition, in the pre-test post-test comparison applied to see the possible effect of the preparatory education, it was observed that there was a positive increase in the use of language learning strategies by the students at the end of the preparatory education. Based on the results, the study is expected to contribute to the theory behind language teaching and learning in Turkey.

Keywords: *Language proficiency, Learning strategies, Preparatory education, University students, Turkish learners.*

Özet

Bu araştırma, iki devlet üniversitesinde bir yıllık İngilizce eğitimi alan öğrenciler tarafından hangi dil öğrenme stratejilerinin (LLS) tercih edildiğine dair anlayışımızı geliştirerek mevcut dil öğrenme stratejileri literatürüne katkıda bulunmayı ve strateji kullanımlarının bu stratejilere uygun olup olmadığını bulmayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmaya Dil Öğrenimi için Strateji Envanteri (SILL) adlı anketi dolduran toplam 286 öğrenci katılmıştır. Daha detaylı bilgi için her üniversiteden 6 öğrenciden görüşme sorularını yanıtlamaları istendi. Çalışmada ayrıca öğrencilerin en çok hangi stratejileri tercih ettiği ve aldıkları hazırlık eğitiminin sonucunda bu stratejilerde değişiklik olup olmadığını saptamak amaçlanmıştır. Araştırmanın sonuçları, öğrencilerin dil öğrenme stratejisi kullanımı ile dil öğrenme düzeyleri arasında anlamlı bir ilişki olduğunu göstermiştir. Ayrıca hazırlık eğitiminin olası etkisini görmek için uygulanan ön test son test karşılaştırmasında öğrencilerin hazırlık eğitimi sonunda dil öğrenme stratejilerini kullanmalarında olumlu bir artış olduğu görülmüştür. Elde edilen sonuçlarla, çalışmanın Türkiye'de dil öğretimi ve öğrenimine katkı sağlaması beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Dil yetkinliği, Öğrenme stratejileri, Hazırlık eğitimi, Üniversite öğrencileri, Türk öğrenciler*

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Introduction

Language is the key of life as it enables people to express their thoughts (Crystal, 2008). Unlike other languages, English has gained far more importance as is “the language of business, technology, science, the Internet, popular entertainment, and even sports” (Nunan, 2003, p. 589). As a consequence of these, a high demand for learning English emerged for people who are in search for a globalized communication, a better job, better education opportunities and an awareness for different cultures (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011). This need for learning English made researchers to investigate how learners can learn a language better and why some learners are better at learning languages (Cohen, 2011; Oxford, 2016; 2018; Wong & Nunan, 2011). As a result, to enhance autonomous learners and to create a learning atmosphere enabling student-centeredness, one of the variables, which gained increased popularity among researchers and teachers, is language learning strategies (LLS) (Brown, 2007; Cohen, 2011; Oxford, 2011; Shi, 2017; Tse, 2011). Although LLS are seen important in language learning and teaching, it is hard to find out a consensus upon the definition of LLS among researchers (Chen, 2007; Cohen, 2011; Ellis, 2008; Oxford, 2016; 2018). Rubin (1975), being among the very first researchers in the field, described LLS as “the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge (p. 43)”. Oxford (2016) in a similar way defines LLS as:

...operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information...; specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations (p. 8).

Phakiti (2003), on the other hand, suggests two roles of LLS: (i) they reinforce learners’ learning and acquisition process, (ii) strengthen their performance while accomplishing a task in the target language, to interact with others; in conclusion, independently of its purpose, using a strategy by learners is performed consciously.

In language education, LLS are accepted to have a significant role by most of the researchers (Cohen, 2011; Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Tirida & Tangkiengsirisin, 2020; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017; Wu, 2008), as LLS are accepted as “making learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). It has also been proposed that effective language learners apply strategies more in most of the learning process compared to weaker ones (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Gan, 2011; Gerami & Baighlou, 2011; Lee & Lyster, 2016).

There are numerous variables that affect the LLS choice of learners including cultural background (Bessai, 2018; Lee & Heinz, 2016), motivation (Oxford, 2016), learning styles (Gungor, Sofraci, Celik, & Yayli, 2016), gender (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Kaplan, 2016), age (Chen, 2007; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017), subject matter and proficiency level (Charoento, 2016; Tirida & Tangkiengsirisin, 2020; Wu, 2008).

As a follow up to the existing studies, the present study aimed to examine the LLS employed by Turkish state university preparation class students. Therefore, a questionnaire based on Oxford's (1990) categorization about LLS and initial and final interviews with some volunteering students were used as data collection tools. The following research questions were addressed:

- 1) What are the possible effects of prep year education on differences upon the students' initial and final uses of the LLS?
- 2) Is there a difference between the students' use of LLS and their proficiency levels?
- 3) What additional insights about the use of LLS in four skills of English and their sub-skills can be gained from students' own statements?

Method

Participants

The participants were the learners enrolled for the prep year to learn English and who were going to be educated in different departments at universities. They were chosen on a voluntary basis. In both universities, students have very similar prep year education. 136 students (74 female; 61 male) from PAU and 156 students (60 female; 92 male) from ADU fulfilled the SILL; and among these students 6 students from each university were asked to answer some interview questions. All the students participated the study were voluntary.

Instruments

Two data collection instruments were used to collect the intended data. The first was the SILL, and the other one was the interview. The aim was to catch the participants' preferences as neatly as possible as it is impossible to figure out LLS use via observation only (Cohen, 2011).

The SILL has 50 items that assess six domains of the LLS. These categories are derived from the results of preliminary studies which made use of the SILL (Oxford, 1990) and Oxford's detailed investigation of other researchers' categories (Rubin 1975).

In this study, interview data were also employed to identify LLS. The interview schedule consisted of four demographic questions including their department, their years of learning English, and 10 guiding questions LLS strategy use.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was carried out in two stages: In the first stage, the SILL of Oxford (1990) which was adapted into Turkish educational contexts by Cesur and Fer (2007) was used for the investigation of the possible relationship among proficiency levels, LLS and prep year education both at the beginning of the fall semester and at the end of the spring semester. Also, interviews, with six students at different levels from each university, were carried out both at the beginning of the fall semester and at the end of the spring semester. Therefore, the study did not depend on a synchronic one-time collection of participants' LLS preferences, but it had a diachronic nature as the participants' initial and final preferences were collected both quantitatively and qualitatively within a longitudinal study design. The quantitative data were analyzed by using descriptive statistics with the SPSS, and the qualitative data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis by using pattern coding for recurrent themes.

Findings

What are the Possible Effects of Prep Year Education on Differences upon the Students' Initial and Final Choices of the LLS?

The scope of this study was the preparatory schools of two state universities in Aydin and Denizli. It was a longitudinal study, aiming at revealing LLS preferences of the prep year learners before starting the program at fall term and at the end of the program in the spring term (Table 1- 2).

Table 1*The General SILL Results of PAU Learners*

STRATEGIES	PAU LEARNERS	PAU LEARNERS
	– at the beginning	– at the end
Cognitive Strategies	(M= 39,80)	(M= 47.98)
Metacognitive Strategies	(M=29,63)	(M=34.77)
Memory Strategies	(M=25,32)	(M=31.84)
Compensation Strategies	(M=18,31)	(M=21.83)
Social Strategies	(M=15,93)	(M=21.17)
Affective Strategies	(M=17,98)	(M=19.22)

Table 2*The General SILL Results of ADU Learners*

STRATEGIES	ADU LEARNERS	ADU LEARNERS
	– at the beginning	– at the end
Cognitive Strategies	(M= 40.07)	(M= 46.59)
Metacognitive Strategies	(M=31,73)	(M=34.09)
Memory Strategies	(M=26,01)	(M=30.30)
Social Strategies	(M=18,72)	(M=21.03)
Compensation Strategies	(M=17,51)	(M=20.63)
Affective Strategies	(M=16,36)	(M=18.16)

In the comparison of the means of the SILL results p value was taken into consideration and results showed statistically significant differences ($p < .003$) in the use of strategies by the participants after prep year education, which means that prep year education can have a positive effect upon learners' use of strategies. According to the results, the participants in the study were aware of the significance of learning English and they applied several kinds of LLS to be able to learn English better. A wide range of LLS use was reported by them and their selection of LLS was significantly different from those they preferred before starting a prep year education. They were observed to use all strategies significantly more frequently than they had used them before receiving prep year education.

The mean scores of learners showed that the most preferred strategies were cognitive (M=7.31) and memory (M=5.34) strategies. These were followed by metacognitive (M=3.68)

and compensation (M= 3,31) strategies. The least preferred strategies were social (M=2.73) and affective (M=2.51) strategies.

Learners preferred memory strategies at different levels of frequency. The most preferred memory strategy both at the beginning (M=3.43) and at the end of the term (M=3.99) was *“I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English”* and the least preferred memory strategy at the beginning of the term (M=2.33) was *“I use flashcards to remember new English words”*. At the end of the term, the least preferred strategy changed to *“I physically act out English words”* (M=2.92).

When we analyzed learners’ use of cognitive strategy frequency, learners preferred these strategies at different frequencies from high-medium of use to low-medium of use. The most preferred strategy selected by the learners both at pre-test phase (M=3.52) and post-test phase (M=4.08) was *“I watch English language TV shows or go to movies in English”* and the least preferred strategy was *“I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English”* both at the beginning of fall term (M=2.07) and at the end of spring term (M=2.74).

It was also found that EFL learners’ frequency of using compensation strategies ranged from high use to medium use at the pre-test phase and at the end of the term, learners used these strategies only with a high use frequency. Learners mostly preferred *“If I can’t think of an English word, I use a word or phrase”* (M=3.27) at the beginning of the fall term. At the end, this strategy was also a highly preferred one (M=3.78) along with the strategy *“When I can’t think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures”* (M=3,78). Learners preferred *“I make up new words if I don’t know the right ones in English”* less than the other items both at the pretest phase (M=2.66) and at the post-test phase (M=3.26).

Metacognitive strategies were used by learners with a medium and high frequency rate. The highly preferred metacognitive strategy by the learners was *“I pay attention when someone is speaking English”* with the mean score 3.8 at the beginning of the term and 4.15 at the end of the term. At the pre-test, learners used *“I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English”* less frequently than the others (M=3.08). At the post-test along with this, the item *“I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English”* was preferred less than others but it had still a high rate of use (M=3.53).

Learners used affective strategies with different frequency ranges (from high to low). *“I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English”* was highly preferred at the beginning of fall term with the mean score 3.51 and it was also highly selected by the

learners at the end ($M=3.77$). On the other hand, learners rarely ticked “*I write down my feelings in a language learning diary*” both at the pre-test phase ($M=1.64$) and at the post-test ($M=2.04$). According to these results, it can be said that most of the learners preferred these strategies in high and medium rate at the beginning and at the end of the term. All the participants preferred social strategies with a high-use range. The strategy “*If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again*” was highly preferred by the students with the mean score of 3.86 at the beginning and 4.12 at the end of the term. Learners preferred “*I practice English with other participants*” in a less frequency rate than other items in the group with the mean score 2.09 at the beginning and 2.82 at the end of the prep year education.

In the analyses presented in this section, there was an increase in the mean scores of all the items in the SILL after the prep year education. This can be interpreted as a benefit of prep year education as it was one of the biggest potential reasons of this increase in the mean scores.

Is There a Difference between the Students’ Use of Language Learning Strategies and Their Proficiency Levels?

To find out if there were any meaningful differences, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to the SILL scores of the learners at the beginning of the fall term and based on the results there was a statistically significant difference among proficiency levels in the participants’ use of cognitive, memory and compensation strategies ($p<.05$). Among the subgroups where significant differences were found, a Scheffe post-hoc analysis was applied. According to the results of Scheffe post-hoc analysis, the intermediate group participants used memory strategies more than their pre-intermediate counterparts did at the beginning of the fall semester ($p<.05$). Furthermore, resulting mean scores indicate that the intermediate proficiency level participants used cognitive and compensation strategies more often than the elementary and pre-intermediate proficiency level learners did.

At the end of the prep year education, all the learners completed the prep year at an intermediate level. However, in order to eliminate misunderstandings, learners’ category names did not change. In order to find out if there were any significant differences in the use of LLS according to their proficiency levels, one-way ANOVA was applied to the SILL scores of the learners at the end of the spring term. The results reveal that significantly meaningful differences existed among proficiency levels with respect to the use of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and social strategies ($p<.05$).

Resulting mean scores of Scheffe post-hoc analysis report that the intermediate level learners used memory, cognitive and compensation strategies most commonly among all three proficiency levels. The mean scores also indicate that the intermediate level learners were more frequent users than elementary level learners in using metacognitive and social strategies.

Findings of Qualitative Analysis of the Interviews as Pre- and Post-Tests

Table 3

The General Interview Results of Learners

	Cognitive		Metacognitive		Memory		Compensation		Social		Affective	
	Beg	End	Beg.	End	Beg.	End	Beg.	End	Beg.	End	Beg.	End
Voc.	11	7	3	10	8	10	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pr.	10	12	7	11	4	9	-	-	2	-	-	-
Gr.	11	12	1	3	7	3	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sp.	12	10	10	10	-	-	11	10	-	1	2	1
List.	4	5	10	10	-	-	1	3	-	-	-	-
Rea.	11	12	7	10	-	1	7	12	-	-	-	-
Wr.	11	9	5	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Voc.= Vocabulary, Pr. =Pronunciation, Gr.= Grammar, Sp.= Speaking-, List. =Listening, Rea. = Reading, and Writ.= Writing. *Beg.* refers to at the beginning and *end* refers to at the end of prep class.

The aim of the interviews was to get a deeper understanding of participants' use of LLS regarding a one-year education period, and therefore semi-structured interviews were held with six students from each university in the study. In the interviews, learners were asked which strategies they use while studying the sub-skills of English, as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Although grammar and vocabulary are not sub-skills, they are important parts of learning English; that is why learners were asked about their strategy uses while practicing these.

Except for listening practices, learners preferred cognitive strategies most both at the beginning and at the end of the term. This was followed by metacognitive and memory strategies. Learners mentioned compensation strategies only in speaking, reading and listening. The least preferred strategies were social and affective strategies. When we compare learners' strategy use based on pre and post-study interview results, it is clear that learners preferred more

strategies at the end of the term than they started the prep class. Furthermore, based on the results it can be said that learners' preferences in interviews and the questionnaire are parallel to each other.

Discussion

Researchers around the world have carried out numerous studies on the use of LLS (Bessai, 2018; Cohen, 2011; Cook, 2013; Gerami & Baighlou, 2011; Shi, 2017; Tirida & Tangkiengsirisin, 2020). However, in Turkish EFL contexts (Cetinkaya, 2017; Demirel, 2012; Erdoğan, 2018; Gürsoy, 2010; Hişmanoğlu, 2000; 2012) the attention which has been paid so far is not comprehensive enough to understand Turkish learners' use of LLS at university prep year educational contexts. Besides, there are not any studies which examine learners' use of strategies in a long time period. In order to understand and explore the nature of LLS used by prep year EFL learners, this study has been shaped.

The results of learners' LLS choices are similar to ones obtained in studies by Allhaysony (2017), and Bessai (2018). Both in the SILL and in the interviews, the participants preferred cognitive and metacognitive strategies more frequently than others, which corroborates the results in other studies (Karatay, 2006; Yılmaz, 2010). Likewise, Gerami and Baighlou (2011), Hamamcı (2012) and İzci and Sucu (2011) have observed metacognitive strategies as the most frequently and affective strategies as the least frequently used ones in their studies.

The results of this study showed that the use of affective and compensation strategies of Turkish EFL students were less frequent than the other strategies. Although there are some exceptional studies in which a high or medium frequent use of affective strategies by university prep class learners (Hişmanoğlu, 2012) and higher use of compensation strategies in EFL learning (Tirida & Tangkiengsirisin, 2020) were observed, many other studies in Turkish contexts such as the ones by Çetinkaya (2017) Erarslan and Höl (2014), Ozmen (2012), Yayla, Kozikoglu and Çelik (2016) and Yılmaz (2010) have captured the use of affective and compensation strategies at low rates. In terms of prep class education influence on the use of LLS, the results showed an increase in learners' use, which can be interpreted as prep year education at university had a positive effect upon these learners' LLS choices even though a deliberate strategy training was not given to them. One reason for this result might be related to the duration of their language study for a year. If learners are exposed to language for long

periods of time, more significant effects on the use of LLS can be observed (Allhaysony, 2017). This study also revealed that more proficient learners preferred using strategies more frequently than their lower-level counterparts, which is in line with the study of Erdoğan (2018). Learners' use of planning and organization as important skills for writing are also in line with other studies (Abdollahzadeh, 2010; Magogwe & Oliver, 2007).

Conclusion

The aim of the study is to explore the use of LLS by EFL students at the prep class of two state universities and the effect of prep class upon learners' strategy choices. In order to have more valid results, both quantitative and qualitative methods were preferred for data collection and analysis. When the results were analyzed, it was seen that the participants reported the frequent use of cognitive strategies while learning English. Cognitive strategy use then was followed by metacognitive, memory, compensation and affective strategies, and at last social strategies. The statistical results and the interview findings were similar in essence and supported each other. Although the strategy use of learners ranged from medium to high both at the beginning and at the end of the term, the high use of strategies outweighed at the end of the term. Learners' preferred strategy types were observed to change at the end of the prep class. For example, at the beginning learners mostly used translation or dictionary in order to find out an unknown word, but at the end of the term this preference has shifted to use another word that they know or try to explain the unknown word with the vocabulary that they already had. According to SILL and interview results, the most infrequently used strategies were affective strategies for learners at both universities. It can be said that learners at both universities were not able to control or overcome their anxiety or nervousness even though they were aware of their current emotional state.

Although the participants in the study were selected on voluntary basis, their motivation for learning English was not taken into account while choosing them, therefore it can be said that these learners may represent a general population of the learners. Last but not least, learners made additional comments about how useful the prep class was for them in terms of language learning and learning to learn.

Recommendations

This study was carried out at two state universities. Further work is needed to include other schools including private universities also with possibly a larger number of students. Also,

studies will need to be replicated so that more consistent information can become available within and across populations.

This study aimed at finding university level EFL learners' preferences of LLS and whether there were any possible effects of learners' prep year education on their choices of LLS. However, there are also other factors such as anxiety, motivation, attitude, self-efficacy beliefs one should consider while choosing LLS, and these factors also deserve attention.

In this study, the researcher aimed to find the LLS use of the prep year students in general and its relationship with proficiency levels before and after the prep year education without any specific strategy training. In further studies, the LLS use of learners can be investigated after giving learners specific strategy training.

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